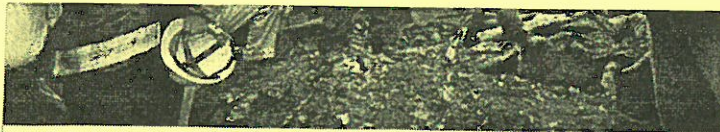


-ENCYCLOPEDIA-



Pres. George W. Bush addressing a crowd as he stands on rubble at the World Trade Center site in ...

Eric Draper/The White House

The aftermath



Notices and pictures of missing persons posted on a mailbox in New York City following the ...

David Finn/Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (ppmsca 01936)

The emotional distress caused by the attacks—particularly the collapse of the twin towers, New York City's most visible landmark—was overwhelming. Unlike the relatively isolated site of the Pearl Harbor attack of 1941, to which the September 11 events were soon compared, the World Trade Center lay at the heart of one of the world's largest cities. Hundreds of thousands of people witnessed the attacks firsthand (many onlookers photographed events or recorded them with video cameras), and millions watched the tragedy unfold live on television. In the days that followed September 11, the footage of the attacks was replayed in the media countless times, as were the scenes of throngs of people, stricken with grief, gathering at "Ground Zero"—as the site where the towers once stood came to be commonly known—some with photos of missing loved ones, seeking some hint of their fate.

Moreover, world markets were badly shaken. The towers were at the heart of New York's financial district, and damage to Lower Manhattan's infrastructure, combined with fears of stock market panic, kept New York markets closed for four trading days. Markets afterward suffered record losses. The attacks also stranded tens of thousands of people throughout the United States, as U.S. airspace remained closed for commercial aviation until September 13, and normal service, with more rigid security measures, did not resume for several days.

The September 11 attacks were an enormous tactical success for al-Qaeda. The strikes were well coordinated and hit multiple targets in the heart of the enemy, and the attacks were magnified by being broadcast around the world to an audience of untold millions. The September 11 "propaganda of the deed" took place in the media capital of the world, which ensured the widest possible coverage of the event. Not since television viewers had watched the abduction and murder of Israeli athletes during the Munich Olympics in 1972 had a massive global audience witnessed a terrorist attack unfold in real time. If al-Qaeda had been a largely unknown organization before September 11, in the days after it became a household name.

After the attacks of September 11, countries allied with the United States rallied to its support, perhaps best symbolized by the French newspaper *Le Monde's* headline, "We are all Americans now." Even in Iran thousands gathered in the capital, Tehran, for a candlelight vigil.

Evidence gathered by the United States soon convinced most governments that the Islamic militant group al-Qaeda was responsible for the attacks. The group had been implicated in previous terrorist strikes against Americans, and bin Laden had made numerous anti-American statements. Al-Qaeda was headquartered in Afghanistan and had forged a close relationship with that country's ruling Taliban government. The United States and its allies launched a military campaign to destroy al-Qaeda's base of operations in Afghanistan.



Memorial to the victims of the September 11 attacks, New York City, 2001

David Finn/Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (ppmsca.01936)

bin Laden and to terminate al-Qaeda activity there.

For the first time in its history, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) invoked Article 5, allowing its members to respond collectively in self-defense, and on October 7 the U.S. and allied military forces launched an attack against Afghanistan (see Afghanistan War). Within months thousands of militants were killed or captured, and Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders were driven into hiding. In addition, the U.S. government exerted great effort to track down other al-Qaeda agents and sympathizers throughout the world and made combating terrorism the focus of U.S. foreign policy. Meanwhile, security measures within the United States were tightened considerably at such places as airports, government buildings, and sports venues. To help facilitate the domestic response, Congress quickly passed the USA PATRIOT Act (the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001), which significantly but temporarily expanded the search and surveillance powers of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other law-enforcement agencies. Additionally, a cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security was established.

Despite their success in causing widespread destruction and death, the September 11 attacks were a strategic failure for al-Qaeda. Following September 11, al-Qaeda—whose name in Arabic means “the base”—lost the best base it ever had in Afghanistan. Later some in al-Qaeda’s leadership—including those who, like Egyptian Saif al-Adel, had initially opposed the attacks—tried to spin the Western intervention in Afghanistan as a victory for al-Qaeda. Al-Adel, one of the group’s military commanders, explained in an interview four years later that the strikes on New York and Washington were part of a far-reaching and visionary plan to provoke the United States into some ill-advised actions:

Such strikes will force the person to carry out random acts and provoke him to make serious and sometimes fatal mistakes....The first reaction was the invasion of Afghanistan.

But there is not a shred of evidence that in the weeks before September 11 al-Qaeda’s leaders made any plans for an American invasion of Afghanistan. Instead, they prepared only for possible U.S. cruise missile attacks or air strikes by evacuating their training camps. Also, the overthrow of the Taliban hardly constituted an American “mistake”—the first and only regime in the modern Muslim world that ruled according to al-Qaeda’s rigid precepts was toppled, and with it was lost an entire country that al-Qaeda had once enjoyed as a safe haven. And in the wake of the fall of the Taliban, al-Qaeda was unable to recover anything like the status it once had as a terrorist organization with considerable sway over Afghanistan.

Bin Laden disastrously misjudged the possible U.S. responses to the September 11 attacks, which he believed would take one of two forms: an eventual retreat from the Middle East along the lines of the U.S. pullout from Somalia in 1993 or another ineffectual round of cruise missile attacks similar to those that followed al-Qaeda’s bombings of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. Neither of these two scenarios happened. The U.S. campaign against the Taliban was conducted with pinpoint strikes from American airpower, tens of thousands of Northern Alliance forces (a loose coalition of mujahideen militias that maintained control of a small section of northern Afghanistan), and more than 300 U.S. Special Forces soldiers on the ground working with 110 officers from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In November, just two months after the September 11 attacks, the Taliban fell to the Northern Alliance and the United States. Still, it was just the beginning of what would become the longest war in U.S. history, as the United States tried to prevent the return of the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies.

In December 2001, faced with the problem of where to house prisoners as the Taliban fell, the administration decided to hold them at Guantánamo Bay, which the U.S. had been leasing from Cuba since 1903. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put it on December 27, 2001, “I would characterize Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, as the least worst place we could have selected.” Guantánamo was attractive to administration officials because they believed it placed the detainees outside the reach of American laws, such as the right to appeal their imprisonment, yet it was only 90 miles (145 km) off the coast of Florida, making it accessible to the various agencies that would need to travel there to extract information from what was believed to be a population of hundreds of dangerous terrorists. Eventually, some 800 prisoners would be held there, although the prison population was reduced to less than 175 by the time of the 10th anniversary of the September 11 attacks.

In his State of the Union speech on January 29, 2002, President Bush laid out a new doctrine of preemptive war, which went well beyond the long-established principle that the United States would go to war to prevent an adversary launching an attack that imminently threatened the country. Bush declared:

I will not wait on events while dangers gather. I will not stand by as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons.

Bush identified those dangerous regimes as an “axis of evil” that included Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. At the graduation ceremony for West Point cadets on June 1, 2002, Bush elaborated on his preemptive war doctrine, saying to the assembled soon-to-be graduates and their families, “if we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.” Bush believed that there would be a “demonstration effect” in destroying Saddam Hussein’s regime, which had threatened to develop weapons like al-Qaeda’s. He also argued that a preemptive strike against Iran, which had threatened to develop nuclear weapons, would

later explained,

What we did after 9/11 was look broadly at the international terrorist network from which the next attack on the United States might come. And we did not focus narrowly only on the people who were specifically responsible for 9/11. Our main goal was preventing the next attack.

Thus, though there was no evidence that Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq had collaborated with al-Qaeda in the September 11 attacks, the United States prepared for conflict against Iraq in its global war against terror, broadly defined.

On March 19, 2003, on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, President Bush issued the order for war:

For the peace of the world and the benefit and freedom of the Iraqi people, I hereby give the order to execute Operation Iraqi Freedom. May God bless the troops.

On March 20 the American-led invasion of Iraq began. Within three weeks U.S. forces controlled Baghdad, and the famous pictures of the massive statue of Saddam Hussein being toppled from its plinth were broadcast around the world.

Binalshibh."

The hunt for bin Laden

In September 2001 President Bush announced that he wanted Osama bin Laden captured—dead or alive—and a \$25 million bounty was eventually issued for information leading to the killing or capture of bin Laden. Bin Laden evaded capture, however, including in December 2001, when he was tracked by U.S. forces to the mountains of Tora Bora in eastern Afghanistan. Bin Laden's trail subsequently went cold, and he was thought to be living somewhere in the Afghanistan-Pakistan tribal regions.

U.S. intelligence eventually located him in Pakistan, living in the garrison city of Abbottabad, and in the early morning hours of May 2, 2011, on orders from U.S. Pres. Barack Obama, a small team of U.S. Navy SEALs assaulted his compound and shot and killed the al-Qaeda leader.

Peter L. Bergen

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